Male: Go ahead.

Interviewer: So, I mean it's hard to know where to begin, I suppose.

Interviewee: Yes, there's a lot of history here.

Interviewer: Yeah. I mean one of the things that struck me immediately when I looked at that oral history in the GW Library was how much white support was important – how important white support was to putting Barry over the top in 1978. Is that something you saw? Is that –?

Interviewee: Yes, that was an essential part. The 1960s, the late '60s, everyone knows was a massive change going on in America. Well, the same is true of the nation's capital. And in Washington, the city had wanted some type of home rule. Lyndon Johnson had tried to get an elected government for the District of Columbia, but the president failed in that, and so he did the next best thing in the '60s: he created an appointed mayor-commissioner form of government with appointed council members.

But that didn't satisfy or solve all the city problems, and so when Marion Barry ran, the crucial issue, the crucial thing that happened was the *Washington Post*, which had a major voice in the Washington communities – particularly the white communities – endorsing, and endorsing to the surprise of many people and gave him an overwhelming endorsement. And that made this person, who had been an activist, a rabble rouser – some people called him a street thug; he was not, but that's what they thought of him 'cause he was constantly challenging the police and established businesses – that gave him legitimacy in the white community and the *Post* endorsed him.

They said it wouldn't be without risk, but they did endorse him, and he won in a spectacular campaign, where the vote was split between Walter Washington, the veteran official who had been appointed as the acting – as the mayor-commissioner by the president, and who had won the first election in 1974 but had been in office a long time. And like in politics, he was seen as kind of tired and losing some of his control over the city. And the other person, Sterling Tucker, the chairman of the council, was the heir apparent, established Urban League guy, paid his dues, and was expecting to be the next mayor. Marion Barry, the street activist, split the two sides and went right through the middle and narrowly won his election in 1978.

Interviewer: That's funny. I find it remarkable that the street activist won and the white vote was so important.

Interviewee: Well, the white vote in the Washington, D.C. – excuse me. The white vote in the District of Columbia is a liberal white vote. There are very few poor white people in the District of Columbia, probably struggling students, but mostly not a lot of poor people. And the white people are politically attuned both to national and local issues. The civil rights movement was a moral imperative. Barry represented that, the chance to have black people run the city government like never before, so it's not a surprise to me that they were for him.

Interviewer: It's I guess contrasting – you know, I'm still looking for the actual numbers, but according to the people who are talking in the oral history, he won Ward Three and he lost Ward Eight, albeit narrowly. And so it's surprising to me that it seems like some of the white precincts were more supportive of the street activist than a lot of the black precincts were.

Interviewee: Yes, but Ward Eight has never been a political powerhouse. It has been for Barry in the later years, when he ran for the council there and won easily. But elections in this city are basically won in Wards One, Two, Three, and Six, with Four being in that mix also. And that's where most of the middle-upper-income African Americans live, and that's where the majority of the white population has lived, and certainly did so back in the '60s.

And so Barry was a street activist. He had got elected to the school board. He'd been elected at large just to the council. He had run the financial revenue committee, which was really important. So he established himself, as he always did, the ability to work in the streets and the suites. He could be at home with the Board of Trade. He could be at home in a community rallying organization somewhere, anywhere, in the city.

But that didn't necessarily always translate into votes east of the river, in Wards Seven and Eight. But Barry knew where the power in the city was, and it was in strong African American leadership, in the communities of Washington, in Ward Four in Northwest Washington, in Ward Five, the middle-class African American community, Ward Three, liberal white community. He did what you have to do in a campaign: he put together a coalition of people.

Interviewer: Sure. And I mean it seems like – and, obviously, if you win by 1300 votes, there's no one factor that explains that.

Interviewee: No, but he got the LGBT community involved, which had never been involved before in local politics to any degree that was noticeable. Again, the '60s were an amazing time of discomfort and demands that things had to be better, and that moved on into the '70s, where the District government was still a ward of the Congress. And Barry said, "We should be able to control our own affairs."

It was not uncommon that some of the most major people who ran the government lived in the suburbs, people who had been appointed by white southern politicians to jobs in the city. And there had been some change under Walter Washington, but Barry said, "We can run our own city." Now, Barry only came to the District in the mid '90s – that's mid '60s, and so he was pretty new himself. But he recognized the yearning in the city. Whatever his faults were, he recognized the yearning in the city that we, the citizens of the city, could control our own affairs like all other Americans.

To this day, of course, that's not true. We don't have voting rights in Congress and other issues where Congress can overturn our local laws, but it was Barry who said, "I can run a local government," and that's what he did. That was his campaign. "Take a stand," he said. "Take a stand."

Interviewer: And white people had that same kind of yearning.

Interviewee: Yes, they did. They saw – you know, Marion Barry ran for mayor in 1978 criticizing the "stumbling and bumbling of Walter Washington." Sterling Tucker, the chairman of the council, was seen as a carbon copy of Walter Washington. They were old school, old line Washingtonians. They had been around a long time. Barry portrayed himself as the fresh, more angry voice that things could be done better.

Interviewer: And white people in Washington had that anger as well.

Interviewee: Well, yes. Everybody wants good – I mean it's not racially specific that people want good services, but the white people, the white voters, the white business people, they wanted a more efficient government, and Barry promised a more efficient governor. He also was telling the black community that "we can open this government to our own people."

One of the most historic things – whatever, you know, all the

things that Barry did wrong in his personal life obscures some of the big things he did in this city. And one was that he opened the city government to the very black people who in fact lived here. They had been shut out of the jobs, out of the contracts, out of the opportunities to do something with their own city government, and he ran for mayor saying that he would be the mayor for the entire city, and he in fact did. Despite again all his problems that people know so well, he opened his city government to the African Americans who lived here.

So he held promise to both white people and to black people that he could make the District of Columbia run better. And most people think that he in fact did. Horrendous problems as he had four terms as mayor, his own personal drug abuse, his own lack of discipline, which had been evident throughout his civil rights days, but he did in fact make major changes in the city that to this day benefit the city that's doing pretty well right now.

Interviewer: Now, yeah, when you say these things date back to his civil rights days, that's not something I've seen evidence of. That doesn't mean I don't believe it. But stuff on the level of what happened to him in 1990 and such, that stuff was happening during his civil rights days as well?

Interviewee: Do you mean his use of drugs and women? Yes. A little book called *Dream City* recounts his numerous issues with women. Barry should be glad he didn't live in the Me Too movement era now. And, yes, it was not uncommon for marijuana to be around in the civil rights movement. It was common in the '60s. I am a product of the '60s. I'll leave it at that. But, yes, he had his own personal problems. He was married four times. He had his own personal issues.

I always give speeches; I say to people, yes, we know all the bad things he did and, yes, you might be willing to listen to the good things he did, but the one thing that Marion Barry I think did not have was discipline. He spent a great deal of his mental and physical abilities getting out of holes that he himself had dug with his own personal misbehavior. That does not take away for a moment what he did for the civil rights and the political rights of African Americans in the District of Columbia.

Interviewer: Now, I know more than one person told Betty King that, for all the problems in his administration – not just his personal, but the corruption that people found in his administration – you will never

find Marion Barry actually taking some money and putting it in his pocket.

Interviewee: That's true. Marion Barry may have taken – he spent a night free in a hotel room, but the FBI looked at Marion Barry any number of times as they were investigating his drug use. They never found any campaign where Barry was taking money. There was no evidence that Barry was enriching himself. You know, some people go into Congress. They're barely making it, poor people, and then when they leave Congress ten years later, they're rich. Barry's focus was never personal money.

He did like the power. He did like to be involved. He did like to be influential. And he wanted to be at the table. And that's where he got his enthusiasm for being a public official. He had the personal desire to show that he was somebody. When he first came to town from the South, many of the established people here in town, African American [establishment], thought of him as Bamma – not a street activist, as many people knew him as, but as a Bamma, some Southern guy who didn't quite fit into the more moderate bourgeois in the city of Washington, D.C.

He caused trouble. He created issues. He created the Pride organization to give young black men and women jobs that they'd never had before. Even as mayor, he created the Summer Jobs Program. Some years it was terribly run, but he says even if it's terribly run, thousands of African American kids got access to the private industry and jobs of this city. And to this day you get people who will tell you, "I got my first job in the Summer Jobs Program" that Muriel Bowser, the current mayor, named after Marion Barry.

So he had all those things to bring together a city, and it got white voters also, who said, "Look, we want somebody to be more dynamic, more aggressive," just as the *Washington Post* editorial page said. "We want somebody who will do something," and he did.

Interviewer: Yeah. I mean he obviously wasn't the first home rule mayor, but he kind of was.

Interviewee: Well, he wasn't – well, obviously, yes. Walter Washington, who in his own right is a strong person but more of a milder personality, a "let's work together, let's get in a room to discuss things," that was the Walter Washington the establishment, just like in any other place. He was the establishment. And Sterling Tucker, again, the

chairman of the council who had hoped to be the next mayor, was equally the establishment. Sterling Tucker had run the Urban League. Walter Washington was a housing official in the federal government.

Marion Barry was a civil rights activist. He said, "We want change." He helped lead a bus boycott. Everyone knows about the Birmingham bus boycott, but few people know about the D.C. transit bus boycott. And he took efforts to get people involved in their own local government. And in America, in a democracy, we're supposed to be involved in our government. He was.

Interviewer: Yeah. One of the things –

Interviewee: *[Clears throat]* Excuse me.

Interviewer: Yeah, and one of the other things that stood out to me was the gay support and how it was very – I mean I feel like he was one of the first heterosexual mayoral candidates to really go and identify the gay community *[crosstalk]*.

Interviewee: Yes, that's true. Oddly enough, Marion Barry voted against same-sex marriage. And part of that was the influence of the African American ministerial community in Washington. But, yes, when he ran for office, he was building a coalition. The civil rights movement of the '60s, or the '50s and '60s and then to the '70s, is a matter of coalition building, getting people who have common interests to overcome their common disagreements. And that's what Barry would do. And he was looking for every vote he could possibly get, and that's what he did.

A lot of the establishment, middle-class African American voters in Washington liked Walter Washington; they liked Sterling Tucker. So he had to do something different. He got white voters. He got LGBT voters. He got senior citizens. He worked very hard, and he barely won. There are many races across the country where people barely win. He barely won, and he built a strong political organization from that.

Interviewer: It seems like, when I think Walter Washington, it seems I think of – in some ways I think of Jackie Robinson, or at least in the first couple of years that Jackie Robinson played. When I hear about John McMillan sending Walter Washington a watermelon, if you'd done that to Marion Barry, the results would have been very different, I suspect, and maybe not to the benefit of the city as a whole. Washington was the kinda guy he had to be.

Interviewee: Well, I don't know about the Jackie Robinson reference. Black people have been trying to gain a firm foothold on the power in this country since they were brought here as slaves. And Walter Washington was a important leader in the transition period, from being a federal official who could run the government – and people forget that when Walter Washington was asked to take over the local city government by President Johnson, it was with the understanding that he would not have authority over police because, somehow or another, a black mayor-commissioner with authority over the police would upset Congress.

And to Walter Washington's credit, he said, "I'm not gonna do that." And so the city mayor-commissioner did in fact get the police control that any local government should have. So he was – in his own era, out of the '40s and the '50s and into the '60s, Walter Washington was a strong voice. But in the '60s and into the '70s, when Barry ran for mayor, there was less tolerance about getting along and going along. You had to confront power. You know power doesn't give up easily. You have to confront power. That's what Barry was able to do.

What was unique about him was that, again, he could sit in the suites of Washington with the most powerful business leaders and lawyers, and he could run the streets with the most disenfranchised people and be able to speak to both. I think that's what the *Washington Post* editorial saw in him, that he would bring action to a government that was kind of – I don't want to use the word "shuffling." It's the wrong word – just moving along very slowly, bureaucratic. And I think Walter Washington suffered from that. When you call somebody "stumbling and bumbling," it's not a reason to go out and vote for them.

Interviewer: Yeah. I remember reading about when Barry was shot as well. I mean what kind of an impact did that have on people?

Interviewee: Well, you know it's unfortunate now that people are shot all the time, and we just had an incident at the Fox 5 just yesterday. But when Barry was shot at the Wilson Building – then called the District Building – it was stunning, a takeover of the District seat of government? Barry easily could have been killed. The bullet wound was close to his heart. It raised his profile, and people said, look, this is a guy who's put his life on the line. He had done so in the civil rights movement and now he had done so in the halls of city government. So that was a shocking thing.

Yes, there were assassinations in the 1960s, but local governments were not places where people were being shot. It was a terrible thing. Barry politically, wisely, used it to his benefit because, having been superficially wounded, he was able to raise his profile yet again as someone who was deeply involved in the District of Columbia government. So it played to his benefit.

Interviewer: Yeah. Now, I've read his book and –

Interviewee: I have not.

Interviewer: Yeah. It's – you know, there are contradictions within the very book, so I –

Interviewee: Well, yes, I'm very familiar with his book, and I've talked to people with whom he worked with it, including his former wife. In that book Barry acknowledged all the womanizing that he had denied endlessly as mayor. It was kind of funny that he did so, but he did. He wanted to tell his story. He told it. It has a lot of negative stuff about how his treatment of women was an issue.

But we're talking about 40 years ago, when Marion Barry was elected the mayor of the District of Columbia. The city, like the rest of the nation, was ready to move on, wanted to throw off the dullness of the '50s, and the '60s had awakened people. And in the '70s Marion Barry said that the city government should be as aggressive and involved in job creating and building up a city and empowering black people that the nation had been talking about for two decades. He says, "We can do that here in the District of Columbia. I can run a government. I can make this a place where everyone will be welcome," and that was his campaign.

Interviewer: But one of the things I noticed in his book which does not comport with a lot of what I've heard is that he was sort of reluctant about running for mayor and sort of decided at the last minute.

Interviewee: Even today we have politicians on both the Republican and Democratic side who if you ask them, "Are you running for president in 2020," they demure, they change the subject: "I'm focused on my job. I'm just trying to help people. I'm not really looking to be mayor. I'm not looking to be president. I'm not looking to run for governor. I'm not looking to run for senator." That's classic political speak.

Barry liked the power he had. He liked using the power he had. But he also was politically smart. He had smart people around him

– Ivanhoe Donaldson and others – who helped shape his political future. I know of no political person who really makes a lot of progress by saying, "I'm gonna do this. I'm gonna do that. I'm gonna be elected senator. Then I'm gonna be president." They harbor those desires, and they're natural, but it's not nice to talk about them.

Interviewer: Yeah. You mentioned Ivanhoe Donaldson. I'm trying to remember who it was who said – and I don't have the exact ward numbers in front of me – but someone told Betty King that two months before the election, Ivanhoe Donaldson rattled off exactly which wards they were gonna win and which wards they were gonna come close on. And that that's exactly what happened.

Interviewee: Right. Well, most all the elections in the District of Columbia are wards – when you want to win a citywide race, you must win One, Two, Three, and Six. Now, you can split Four. You can split Five. You can win Seven and Eight. There just historically have not been the numbers of voters in Seven and Eight that can sway elections. They can help one way or the other, but they cannot sway. The core vote is in the core of the city, and that's where it's always been.

And Ivanhoe was a good vote counter. Anita Bonds, who is now a councilmember herself, running for reelection, helped keep track of everybody on index cards. It goes way back. I mean it was a long time ago, before social media, before African American rights in cities across the country were really recognized. It was a different time, a different era, but the desire for change was larger than all the impediments that lay before Marion Barry.

Interviewer: Yeah. It's quite an operation before. I mean it's not only before social media. It's almost literally before computers.

Interviewee: It was before computers were used, yes. It was all index cards. It's hard when you look back on the 1978 election for Barry without having your memory distorted or changed somewhat because of the troubles he had in his life. His drug abuse, some of the government malfunctions can overwhelm the good things. The bad things we all remember about somebody, the good things less so.

But even accounting for all the bad things that occurred through Barry's entire political career cannot take away from what happened in 1978 and what he did for the city and for African Americans. They were strangers in their own land in this city. He opened the doors to the District Building, the government building,

and said, "Come in and be part of the city where you live."

That's the problem with gentrification now in the city. I went recently to something in Bloomingdale, a little neighborhood in near Northwest Washington, where there was a block party, and the block party was being put on by a real estate company, which is essentially mostly white people, and they're selling homes in Bloomingdale, which is rapidly gentrifying. And I saw several older African Americans who were coming out of their homes and kind of peeking and peering over at "What's happening? This is my neighborhood. I don't know these people." But they're coming and this is gentrification.

Barry was [opposite] to the gentrification. He said, "You live in this city. You should be part of this city. African Americans are gonna be part of the communities. They're gonna be part of the businesses. They're gonna be in the schools. They're gonna be in our city agencies." And that was a riveting change for this little community called District of Columbia.

Interviewer: And so it was still – the city bureaucracy was still largely white with Walter Washington as mayor?

Interviewee: Yes. Yes. Many of the department heads were white. Many of the employees were white and lived in the suburbs and did not live in the city. Now because Barry created a whole African American middle class, many of those folks actually made it – well, and they went to the suburbs. That's part of the issue in this city about gentrification and the change. You know, back in the '60s and '70s, this city was like 70 percent black. It's now around 46, 47 percent black. That is a historic change.

Many of the African Americans who, having done well in the new era of Marion Barry, moved to the suburbs would dearly love to come back to the city, a city they now can't afford. So it's very different. It's very different. And when you see African Americans concerned about politics and who's running the city, it's in part because they feel like they're losing the very political powers that they started getting under Marion Barry.

Interviewer: Yeah. It's one of the things – his name is Sam Smith at the –

Interviewee: Sam Smith

Interviewer: Yeah. He wrote –

Interviewee: The *Progressive*.

Interviewer: Yeah, he wrote that what we call corruption – and, obviously, on some level is – I mean that's how it works in a city, really. That's how, after you had an Italian mayor in Providence, suddenly you had Italians in the bureaucracy in the city, and the Irish in Boston. And this is just – you know, you might –

Interviewee: It's historic. I mean politics, it's always had this type of underbelly of control, power. And when people say, "Oh, the District of Columbia. Marion Barry. Whatever good he did, he did all these bad things. You should never have voting rights. You should never have statehood. You guys in the nation's capital, you're just wards of the federal government. It's all just horrible."

I talked to some people from Los Angeles just recently at Ben's Chili Bowl, 'cause they wanted to go there, this tour group. I said, "I will always make this promise. I'll give up our hope for statehood, I'll give up our voting rights, I'll give up control of the city government if you go to Illinois and take away the voting rights of the people of Illinois, where four of their last five governors have gone to prison; if you go to Maryland, where Marvin Mandel went to prison, and take away Maryland's voting rights; if you go to Louisiana and any other state you name in this country where politicians have been corrupt, evil. And if you take away their voting rights, take away mine, or don't give me mine, but I would like to have some."

So the District of Columbia is not some unique Petri dish of politics. It's got local, hometown politics. It's got big aspirations. It's got good people. It's got bad people. And I always tell people who come here and I talk about the nation's capital. I'll say the nation's capital is the most un-American city in America because we don't have the same rights as all the other Americans. But in many ways we're just like you. We have synagogues. We have mosques. We have churches. We have community schools. We have charter schools. We have small business. We have big business.

We are just like all other Americans, but somehow or another, when people look at the little District of Columbia, they think we're a ward of the federal government. They still think we would not exist without the federal government pouring money into the city. It's simply not true. We get federal money for poor programs just like Alabama and Virginia do. We get all the same programs for highway funds, just like Maryland and New Jersey does. We

are the same as all other Americans except people conflate us with the federal government and, therefore, we don't have the same rights as Americans.

And that's a little off topic for Marion Barry's election in 1978, but there is a long historic desire for the people of the District, dating before World War Two, to be seen as ordinary Americans, and so far we're not. Barry, had he not had all his personal travails – his drug abuse and some of the scandals in his government – then we would not – maybe we'd be farther down that road. Some people say, "Oh, well, once we get a white majority city, then the Congress will turn around. They'll give us all voting rights. We'll all be happy." That's not true. But Barry was a historic figure at a crucial time in the change in the District of Columbia for good and bad, mostly for good, but as you know, we all remember the bad more than the good.

Interviewer: Yeah. I mean one of the things that struck me, I know he was – I read one of his position papers when he was on the revenue and finance committee.

Interviewee: Finance and revenue? Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. Finance and revenue committee. And, yeah, he wanted the District to be able to tax people who worked in the District and lived outside.

Interviewee: Yes, the commuter tax.

Interviewer: Yeah. You weren't able to do that at the –?

Interviewee: We weren't, specifically were not. In this nation – most people don't quite realize this – but every government in the country, every state government, every city government taxes income at its source. That is, if you work in the District of Columbia, you should have to pay taxes to the District 'cause that's where you earn your money. When the District got home rule back in 1973 with a law which said, –

Male: I'm listening. I just want to make sure [unintelligible].

Interviewee: Don't make me *[inaudible due to speaking under his breath]*. When the District got – Congress approved home rule in 1973 for elections in 1974, there was a specific provision in the home rule charter that says the District of Columbia may not impose a commuter tax. And the reason is because Maryland and Virginia at

that time were able to tax the people who worked in the city.

So if you lived in Arlington and you worked in the city, your taxes didn't go to the city government. They went to Richmond. And if you lived in Maryland and you worked in the city, your income taxes didn't go to the city. They went to Annapolis. That is the most bizarre system of taxation in the city. In New York, in Connecticut, New Jersey, if you earn money in one place, you pay taxes – at least a portion of your taxes. So the city should be allowed. If we could tax people who worked in the city, the city could cut its income taxes in half.

Interviewer: So this is still the case.

Interviewee: It's still the case. We are still not allowed to tax people who live in the suburbs and work in the city. If you are a lawyer and you live in Maryland and you as a lawyer practice in Maryland, Virginia, the District, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, you pay taxes to all those states where you have legal work, except for one. You don't pay anything to the District of Columbia, even if you use 90 percent of your business here, because we cannot tax people who live outside of the District of Columbia. It's unfair.

At the time when the city first happened, it was like a billion dollars a year. In the '80s it was like a billion dollars a year of money that was earned in the city but taxed in the suburbs. And now it's $2 billion. So people coming to the city, they don't pay taxes. And the members of the House and Senate in Maryland and Virginia, 22 members total, don't want the city to have taxing authority 'cause we would get a lot of money and we could cut our own taxes.

Interviewer: You know it's still the case.

Interviewee: Yes, still the case. We are in a – what is that? – a gunfight with one – no, it's some kind of wrestling match with one hand tied behind our backs. The city is financially doing very well, from the '90s near bankruptcy to now it's one of the most financially healthy jurisdictions in the country even though we are not allowed to tax as other [unintelligible].

Yes, there's a lot of things that people don't quite understand about the city, even if – every law that the city passes has to go to Congress to lay over for 30 legislative days. And that means when they're in session, so it could be months before the law becomes law because it has to lay over in case one member of Congress out

of 535 says, "Well, I don't think I like that law. Let's have a hearing."

So the city is – this is some of the irritation that existed back when Barry was first elected as mayor. It exists to this day. You can ask Muriel Bowser. She has the same passion about it that Marion Barry did, is that we are mistreated and we are maligned as somehow not quite Americans, as we're some ward of the federal government. It's simply not true. Barry knew it in the '70s. Tony Williams knew it in the '80s – or is '90s? [unintelligible]. I forget all these – too many damn mayors.

Anyway, every mayor since Walter Washington has known that this city plays on an uneven playing field. Barry was very good at moving the ball down the field. Other mayors have not been as good. But that's the importance of Marion Barry. Despite his troubles, despite all the bad that people know, he did many good things to direct the city towards self-control, even though he personally had little self-control, to his detriment.

Interviewer: Okay. Well –

Interviewee: All right. Does that help?

Interviewer: It helps a lot. I appreciate it.

Male: And thanks –

[End of Audio]